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ABSTRACT

Historic preservation, as an illuminator of U.S. history and culture, can be used to support and enhance the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools. In line with the mission of schools, historic preservation involves the maintenance of culture--the sites, structures, and objects that constitute the tangible legacy from the past and reflect the identities, values, traditions, and aspirations of the past citizens of the United States. The school curriculum reform in the 1980s recommends an extensive core curriculum that reflects common ideas, experiences, and traditions; and historic homes, bridges, workplaces, and other structures are tangible forms of these legacies. An outcome of common learning is cultural literacy which can be enhanced by including video programs and photographs of landmark sites. Cultural literacy is fostered through the strong revival of interest in geography and history, and landmark sites can be readily connected to the fundamental themes of these disciplines. Heritage education can foster the common memory that a diverse population needs in order to survive and thrive. (DJC)

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HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM*

BY

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*Presented to a symposium on "Heritage Education" which was held on May 11, 1988 at the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives, Washington, D.C. The symposium was sponsored by The National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM*

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Historic preservation, as an illuminator of our history and culture, can be used to support and enhance the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools. Why is this so? Well, historic preservation can buttress and improve the school curriculum, because schools in the United States and elsewhere are expected to transmit the national heritage, to conserve certain values and traditions, to preserve a way of life. Induction of youngsters into the national literate culture is fundamentally what schools are about--in this country and in other lands throughout our world.[1] In line with the mission of schools, historic preservation involves the maintenance of the very stuff of culture--the sites, structures, and objects that constitute our tangible legacy from the past and reflect the identities, values, traditions, and aspirations of our predecessors in this land.[2] So, strong linkages can be made between historic preservation and a major goal of elementary and secondary schools, which is to educate all students in the heritage of our American nation.

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What is heritage education? And exactly how does it involve historic preservation? Consider this definition of the National Council for Preservation Education in its report on heritage education in elementary and secondary schools:

> Heritage education programs introduce the built environment directly into the education process at the elementary-secondary level in arts, humanities, science and vocational courses. They focus primarily on older and historic man-made structures and environments, promoting their use in curriculum as visual resources for teaching knowledge and skills, as artifacts for the study of a continuum of cultures, and as real and actual places that students of all ages can experience, study, and evaluate first hand.[3]

This definition suggests that historic preservation, and education in the American heritage that stems from it, can be linked to main themes of elementary and secondary school curriculum reform in the 1980s, such as (1) support for common learning through a core curriculum, (2) cultural literacy for all students, and (3) history and geography as the central subjects of the social studies in elementary and secondary schools. I will consider the connection of historic preservation and heritage education to each of these three themes in the current literature on curriculum reform.

1. Common Learning Through a Core Curriculum

Virtually every major curriculum reform report of the 1980s has recommended an extensive core curriculum for all students in high school. Ernest Boyer, for example has argued that, "A core of common learning is essential. The basic curriculum should be a study of those consequential ideas, experiences, and traditions common to all of us. . . ."[4] Boyer's opinion has been supported and restated again and again by leaders of various organizations with quite different images and agendas (e.g., the College Entrance Examination board, Council for Basic Education, Education Commission of the States, and the Committee for Economic Development).[5]

Certainly, the "man-made structures and environments" of our American culture--the tangible forms of our legacy as a nation and a people--embody and illuminate "ideas, experiences, and traditions common to all of us." So, education about historic homes, bridges, workplaces, and other structures of our built environment belongs in the core curriculum of our schools as important parts of courses in history, geography, literature, music, and art.

Our American heritage embedded in the built environment reflects core values that sustain us as one

nation, forces for cohesion in a society marked by pluralism and tolerance for diversity. This tangible legacy of our American heritage also reflects the rich diversity of the American people. Thus, education in the heritage of our built environment can enhance learning of a fundamental paradox of our American nation--unity with diversity--a paradox at the heart of our culture, which is difficult to comprehend and appreciate. But knowledge and acceptance of national unity with social diversity is a requisite of cultural literacy in the United States.

2. Cultural Literacy and Heritage Education

An intended outcome of common learning through a core curriculum is cultural literacy--knowledge of key facts and ideas of a human community, which is needed for intelligent and fruitful participation in the community.[6] It is obvious that development of cultural literacy is likely to be enhanced by moving outside of the rather sterile pages of textbooks and worksheets to examination of the landmark sites that are the objects of historic preservation. In this way, abstractions of the past are linked to tangible forms in the present, and empathy for people of the past is encouraged--an ability to sense how individuals of long ago felt about the events and challenges of their era.

Video programs are an especially effective means of instruction about historic places, which can contribute greatly to cultural literacy among students with a wide range of scholastic ability. For example, an excellent way to teach about the 19th century era of steamboats and canal barges is to use an educational video program that provides vivid pictures, with narration, of barges moving down the Erie Canal and of the Delta Queen steaming down the Ohio River. Or one can movingly teach about an antebellum plantation of the Old South by using an educational video program on the Florewood River Plantation in Greenwood, Mississippi.[7]

Packets of photographs and video programs that feature historic sites can be used as sources of evidence about the past, in the same way that written primary sources are used in a sound course in history. Indeed, one might also use a field trip to an historic site in the same way, as a primary source of data to interpret, analyze, and evaluate.

The use of historic landmarks--the tangible forms of our American heritage--to foster cultural literacy is one of the strongest justifications for historic preservation. This is especially so today when a large proportion of young Americans seem to be failing to learn the core

values and knowledge that constitute the common memory so essential to cultural literacy.[8] The consequences of this failure could be severe for individuals and their society. Americans who lack cultural literacy are critically handicapped, as is the culture which may not survive a generation that fails to know it and value it.

3. History and Geography as Vehicles of Heritage Education

The perceived need to foster cultural literacy is one reason for the strong revival of interest in geography and history as the central subjects of the social studies in elementary and secondary schools. For example, history and geography are the essential elements of the new "California Curriculum Framework."[9] And the basic importance of these two subjects is a major theme in the work of several high-powered curriculum reform commissions and projects, such as the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools and the Geographic Education National Implementation Project.[10]

Of course, there is a clear connection between historic preservation and heritage education and the fundamental themes of education in geography and history. Consider for a moment five main themes of education in geography: location, place, human-environment interactions,

movement of people/ideas/goods, and formation and change of regions.[11] Teaching and learning about each of these five themes can be greatly enhanced through the use of the built environment--the objects of historic preservation and one means of education about our American heritage.

The same point might be made about main themes of historic literacy, such as examination of continuity and change, development of historical empathy, analysis of cause and effect, development of common memory, and understanding of time and chronology.[12] These ideas can be treated more realistically and meaningfully through use of historic places and the built environment.

It seems that the strong revival of interest in history and geography, as staples of elementary and secondary education in the social studies, bodes well for the contributions that historic preservation and heritage education might make to improvements in the curriculum of our schools. The objects of historic preservation can be readily connected to a curriculum dominated by history and geography.

4. A Concluding Comment About Historic Preservation and the School Curriculum

It seems that we Americans have a very special need for historic preservation and heritage education, which stems from the extraordinary origins of our nation. Consider these words of Edmund S. Morgan, the eminent historian of the American Revolution:

> Nationalism has been the great begetter of revolutions. In Europe, in Asia, in Africa, we have seen it stir one people after another: they grow proud of their traditions, of their language, of their identity, and they strike for independence. In our case it was the other way round: we struck for independence and were thereby stirred into nationality; our nation was the child, not the father, of our revolution.[13]

Our nation was born through the overthrow of traditions, and we Americans have tended to be antitraditional ever since the revolutionary origin of our nation. Unlike other nations (France and Poland, for example), we were NOT joined together by kinship, tribal associations, or traditional ties to territory; our bonds of nationhood have little to do with "blood and soil." Instead, our ties were and are based primarily on shared civic values--common beliefs about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a free government. Historic preservation helps to sustain these bonds of nationhood by maintaining tangible objects that represent

the core values of our American nation. And heritage education about these objects of historical preservation is a means to foster the common memory that our nation of diverse groups needs in order to survive and thrive.

Notes

1. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1987).

2. Steering Committee of the National Historic Preservation Forum, A Historic Preservation Challenge (Washington, DC: The National Historic Preservation Forum, 1987).

3. Committee on Elementary-Secondary Education, A Heritage at Risk: A Report on Heritage Education (K-12) (Washington, DC: National Council for Preservation Education, 1987), 4.

4. Ernest L. Boyer, High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 302.

5. Ian McNett, Charting a Course: A Guide to the Excellence Movement in Education (Washington, DC: Council for Basic Education, 1984).

6. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Cultural Literacy.

7. Jim Fleet and John Patrick, A Teacher's Guide to America Past--A Series of Video Programs for Use in Schools (Bloomington, IN: Agency for Instructional Technology, 1987).

8. Lynne V. Cheney, American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1987).

9. History-Social Science Framework and Criteria Committee, History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve (Sacramento: California State Board of Education, 1988).

10. The Bradley Commission has an office at 26915 Westwood Road, Suite A-2, Westlake, Ohio 44145; The Geographic Education National Implementation Project is sponsored by the National Geographic Society, which is headquartered in Washington, DC.

11. Joint Committee on Geographic Education, Guidelines for Geographic Education: Elementary and Secondary Schools (Washington, DC: Association of American Geographers and National Council for Geographic Education, 1984).

12. History-Social Science Framework and Criteria Committee, History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools.

13. Edmund S. Morgan, The Birth of the Republic, 1763-89 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 100.